

100 YEARS AGO -- AMERICA'S FIRST SUMMER ART SHOW

by Pamela G. Bond

The Beginning

The Lyme Art Colony made its official debut when it opened America's first summer art show on August 27, 1902. Founded by Henry Ward Ranger, the Art Colony was not the first in America, but certainly the most successful. Ranger, a broadly-travelled Tonalist painter, 41 years old and well-to-do, arrived in Old Lyme in 1899 in search of an American Barbizon. Recommended by an artist friend, and knowing that reduced circumstances had caused the lady to accept boarders, Ranger called on Miss Florence Griswold in the summer of 1899. He asked her to consider turning her Lyme Street home into a French-style artist's *pension*. The large and handsome house she had inherited, though somewhat decrepit, lay surrounded by 15 acres on the curve of a river, graced by mature trees, rotting outbuildings, overgrown gardens, a stream, a dam, a waterfall, and a pond. To Ranger, a landscape painter's paradise.

Ranger

He stayed that summer and in 1900, with his landlady's permission, persuaded artists to share Miss Florence's bountiful hospitality. Thoroughly enjoying the life she referred to them and those who came after as "my boys," encouraging and feeding their shames and putting up with the frolics of the fun-loving group, providing the perfect space for the making of art. She did not object when, borrowing a custom of French Barbizon, they moved on to the panels of her dining room [see page...]. Henry Rankin Poore took on the mantlepiece, picturing a caricature-like scene of those staying there in his time. The "boys" had for space in that magic dining room and, when there was no more, painted on both sides of parlour, bedroom, and hall doors. The pictures are still there, a telling tribute to the painters and their beloved landlady.

Poore

These men were not unknown artists, nor strangers to each other. The first wave of Lyme Colony enthusiasts had been friends since the days they studied at the Academie Julian or the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, or privately in London. Most had exhibited at the Paris Salon and the National Academy of Design; all were artists of national reputation, as celebrated in France as they were in America. The majority were members of the Lotos Club in New York (a gentleman's club for artists and collectors that greatly favored Tonalist painting). They shared admiration for the French Barbizon style and, together, hoped to create a similar School to showcase the American landscape. Inspired by the camaraderie of painters in the French countryside, they were looking for (and found) the same spirit in American rural surroundings.

The Exhibit

The 1902 exhibit of summer painting -- and eighteen annual exhibits thereafter -- took place in the reading room of the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library, the only space large and handsome enough to accommodate an art exhibit and, coincidentally, in dire need of funds to purchase books. To encourage attendance, a collection of locally owned antiques, porcelain and memorabilia were added to the exhibit. It attracted a throng -- the Library collected \$180 at 50 cents a head -- and received some splendid reviews. Sadly, only the Hartford Courant write-up survived the Old Lyme flood of 1982.

The Courant's "special correspondent" was obviously familiar with Old Lyme and almost certainly a resident. Under his "Lyme, August 30" dateline -- at that time Lyme and Old Lyme were used interchangeably -- he begins: "Few people are aware that Lyme is noted among artists for having the best scenery from the standpoint of the painter of any spot in New England. The views are beautiful and in miniature enabling the artist to reproduce them in all their beauty while there is a softness in the atmosphere which is of great value to the artists." That scenery, he writes, attracted about fifty itinerant artists to the area in the summer of 1902. He goes on to say that those who had been there for some years "at Miss Florence Griswold's place" where they erected studios, had displayed their work at the library "to give voice to their admiration of the town." After two and a half columns under sub-headings Antiques and China Ware, with detailed descriptions and names of owners and past owners, The Paintings only get a mention in his final paragraph. He writes that Henry Ward Ranger, who showed Moonlight and Autumn Woods, "is said by the great artist, Whistler, to be fitted to fill the place left vacant by *Inness." He adds "Allen B. Talcott of Hartford exhibited a scene along the river, the old scow boat being loaded with hay at Motts Island; Walter Griffin of Hartford had a sketch On the Maine Coast; Arthur Dawson of New York had a charming hillside picture, Lewis Cohen of New York, Golden Spring; W.H. Howe of New York showed the only animal picture, Truants, and a Portrait of cattle drinking at the brook; Frank Vincent DuMond of New York sold his The Sign to Mrs. W.G. Lane for \$350; Gifford Beal of New York showed a variety of hill, wood and lake in his unnamed contribution; R. Tait McKenzie, professor of anatomy and physiology at McGill University, Montreal, exhibited two bronze statues The Sprinter and The Strength Test; Louis Dessar of New York In Evening Shadows; Clark Voorhees of New York Early Spring Sunlight."

Talcott
Griffin
Cohen
Howe
DuMond
Beal
Dessar
Voorhees

Prohecy Fulfilled

The Hartford Courant correspondent ended his introductory paragraph with a remarkable prediction: "I thought that around this exhibition as a nucleus will form an art school located here and that a gallery will be added to the library where the artists can exhibit their work at all times, adding greatly to the charm of the village as a resort for visitors."

The Lyme Colony artists formed the Lyme Art Association in 1914 and built their own beautiful gallery*, designed by Charles Platt, which opened in 1921, though not as an addition to the Library. (The Library doubled its own space, for books, in 1990.) The Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, founded by famous American sculptor Elizabeth Gordon Chandler in 1976, began in the basement of the Lyme Art Association. The Academy, now an accredited 4-year College, bought a fine house in 1985 and, with land and start-up funding donated by descendants and collectors of those early painters, has been adding buildings ever since. Miss Florence Griswold's boarding house, home to Lyme Art Colony painters until her death in 1936, has become a Museum, attracting visitors from all over the U.S. and abroad, and attaining National Historic Landmark status in 1992. Miss Florence herself was inducted this year into the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame. And the charm of the village has never declined.

Platt

The Poster Mystery

The 1902 poster [see page] promotes a showing by twelve artists, eleven successful enough to spend entire summers painting in the country while maintaining living quarters in big

cities elsewhere, and one nobody. Nothing is known of "Miss Saunders" whose name rounds off the list. She never exhibited again, no reviews mention her, and a search of town records reveals no marriage of a Miss Saunders to one of the resident artists. It is entirely possible, given the fun-loving, inventive nature of Miss Florence's paying guests, that a fictitious Miss Saunders was added to even out the 3 columns of exhibitors -- eleven names might have presented a graphic designer's nightmare. Intended to encourage visitors from New York, Boston, Hartford, New Haven and New London, the poster included comprehensive train timetables of the exhibit and notice of the availability of Livery from station to library.

The Artists

Henry Ward Ranger had already earned a reputation in New York and abroad as a fine watercolorist, but his first glimpse of Barbizon painting at a New York Gallery changed his direction. Fascinated by the oil landscapes painted in the country around Fontainebleau Forest, Ranger travelled to the Paris Salon to see more. There was hardly a Barbizon picture to be seen! Totally rejecting the new Impressionism that had replaced the Barbizon School in the Salon, he left Paris at once, heading for the Barbizon area. He learned their "tonal" techniques and visited artists' haunts in Holland and England to study new "old master" methods. Then he returned home to search for a countryside *pension* where congenial American artists might spend summers painting their own landscape in Tonalist style.

It is ironical that the 1903 summer show (twenty-one paintings by fourteen artists) brought the decline of *Tonalism in Old Lyme and replaced it with *Impressionism. Every 1902 exhibitor was represented except sculptor McKenzie, who did not show again, and Walter Griffin, who returned in 1904 and stayed on. They were joined by W.H. Howe, an animal lover whose genial renderings of cattle grace the walls of Old Lyme's Town Hall today; Will Howe whose Summer entry can be seen at the Florence Griswold Museum; landscapes were painted by Charles Davis and Robert Minor (his paintings had earned him a French Legion of Honor), and "Henry Rankin Poore joined the ranks that year with "After the Chase," a group of some bounds on a grassy bank. But charismatic Childe Hassam, fresh from a *succes fou* at the Paris Salon, showed his Impressionist painting "Spring Morning" and won the day. With a single picture, Childe Hassam (possibly the best American painter of his time) started the Lyme Impressionist movement that became the mark of the Lyme Art Colony.

Howe
Foote
Davis
Minor
Hassam

Ranger was shaken. Especially when even the most ardent advocates of Tonalism, his colleagues, adopted the Impressionist mode. He spent the remains of the summer painting rich Tonalist landscapes, inside his studio, despite the good-natured jibes of *plein air*-ists who referred to Tonalism as "the brown-gravy School." Impressionism was probably a lot more fun and certainly easier to do than the painstakingly executed landscapes produced by Ranger and his fellow Tonalists but, in Ranger's mind, perhaps Lyme Impressionism's worst fault was that it attracted crowds of tourist-painters, even summer art schools, and "over-populated" the town. He showed at the Library again in 1904 but, the next year, moved away to a summer house and studio in the seaside town of Noank. (His ensuing New York successes included six one-man shows, his later pictures tinged with no more than a brushful of Impressionist touches.

Scores of well-known artists followed (most of them members or Associate members of

the National Academy) attracted by the growing reputation of the Colony. Edward F. Rook came in 1904. An eccentric man, he favored large canvases and seemed as fascinated by rushing water as by the peaceful interiors he painted. He built a year-round house near Miss Florence's and exhibited regularly until 1920, when he gave up painting in favor of collecting cars.

Rook

1905 brought Willard Metcalf to Old Lyme and fame to Willard Metcalf: his beautiful "May Night," a nocturnal scene of Miss Florence's house, won a Gold Medal at the Corcoran Gallery. (He had offered the painting as a gift to his landlady, but she advised him to submit it instead to the Corcoran competition.) Bolstered by that award, his career soared in his native Boston as well as New York. He stayed at Miss Florence's every summer through 1909. Guy Wiggins also came that year, from New York, and was soon as well known for his summer landscapes in Lyme as his winter scenes in The City. He bought a house in Lyme, started a school, and showed with the Art Colony artists every year until his death.

Metcalf
Wiggins

George Bruestle, a Paris colleague of the earlier artists, arrived in 1905 and bought a summer house on Hamburg Cove that year. He brought his family, and painted exquisite small pictures of the surrounding country. His was the first painting in full color to be chosen by the artists to illustrate posters for the annual exhibition in 1924.

Bruestle

William Chadwick came in 1906 and his vibrant Impressionist painting of Miss Florence on the side porch of her home has become a symbol of halcyon summers with the artists. He bought a home in Old Lyme and built a studio that was moved in 1992, just as he left it, onto the grounds of Miss Florence's pension. Charles Vezin arrived from New York in 1907. (His is the

Chadwick
Vezin

York scene in Miss Florence's dining room.) The next summer he rented a house in Cove, in Lyme, so enchanted by the changing light that he painted each landscape early morning and late afternoon.

Later, following a continuing series of bright stars in the painting world, Wilson Irvine came from Chicago and dedicated the rest of his life to painting the Connecticut countryside. Gregory Smith arrived from St. Louis -- his "Bow Bridge" is the most beautiful of the many Impressionist pictures of the old bridge, now gone -- and started a family here. Impressionist Robert Vonnoh brought his wife, a famous sculptor, one of the few women to stay at Miss Florence's. Other early women (painters) spent summers at the celebrated boarding house:

Irvine
Smith
Vonnoh

Robert Roberts married fellow-lodger Charles Ebert, took his name and painted beside him. Matilda Brown stayed a while, then bought a house on Lyme Street that became a subject for many an artist. Edmund Greacen, who called himself (with reason) a Giverny Impressionist, came summer after summer. Harry Hoffman, famed for his sense of humor, whose underwater scenes (Bahamas) were surely the first of that genre to be painted; Bruce Crane, who loved the effect of snow as background; Jules Turcas, whose portraits of Miss Florence in her home describe her inner beauty as no words could.

Roberts
Ebert

Brown
Greacen

Hoffman
Crane

Turcas

The Lyme Art Association

Every summer brought more artists, attracted as much by tales of the kindness of the

legendary Miss Florence as by the vaunted beauty of the scenery. Visitors came to every exhibit and returned to see the studios, caught up by the stories of sales, awards, museum acquisitions, and collector enthusiasm appearing in the New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington press. Sales soared. Exhibitions at the Library flourished to the point that each artist's showing space had to be limited. Miss Florence continued as patron saint, surrogate mother and advocate for her beloved Lyme Art Colony but, by 1913, the Library walls could no longer hold all the entered pictures.

In 1914 the artists, spurred on by Miss Florence, formed the Lyme Art Association with the express intent of building their own gallery. She at once deeded a corner parcel of her land to The Lyme Art Association, Incorporated, for the sum of one dollar, with a single irrevocable condition: "that said grantor shall have the exclusive privilege of gathering ice on the pond." An ice source for the larder was of paramount importance to a lady known for a lavish table.

World War I interrupted the Association's plans and it was 1919 before construction began on the only art gallery in America financed by the artists it would serve. Architect Charles A. Platt, designer of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and the library at Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut, graciously donated the building design. On August 6, 1921, the handsome Lyme Art Association gallery opened its doors. Inside, the hall and three rooms were filled with the art of its members (the artists who contributed to the building fund.) Outside, a teaparty occupied the lawn. Miss Florence presided over the tea table. The artists warily sipped tea, dressed in city clothes for once, their ladies done up in gauzy dresses and garden party hats. Local residents, awed by the occasion, hesitated on the threshold, uncertain whether to go inside to see the pictures or stay outside and try to recognize the artists.

WWI
sign

The gallery stayed open the rest of the summer and every summer after that. Miss Florence could be seen each day, sitting in the portico, calling out to passersby, inviting them to display of the "boys" work. She insisted on managing the gallery's affairs so that the artists might have more time to paint. In 1925 the Association held its first Watercolor Show, before the Summer Exhibition. It became known as the Spring Exhibition and, in 1933, an Autumn Exhibition was introduced to accommodate the growing output of the artists who dotted the countryside every sunny day. It eventually became a year-round gallery.

Today

Miss Florence died in 1936, immortalized by the renowned artists who became her family and painted portraits of her that now hang in museums (including the one that was once her home) and in the Lyme Art Association which would not have existed without her. Those artists who followed Ranger, founder of the Lyme Art Colony also, in time, passed on. Under the old rules, new members were elected at five-year intervals: the Association found itself with less and less art to display. Also, times had changed. Today's artists are not as carefree as those early painters; the vast majority can only dedicate to painting the hours left over from earning a living. So the rules changed. Elections are more frequent and the added category of associate members produces a pool from which to elect permanent members. To keep up quality, shows are juried. Short seminars are often held by well-known artists aware of students' time limits. Recognized art groups vie to rent space for their exhibits. Thus, the Lyme Art Association

Gallery is still open year-round. There are, as in the past, four shows each year (for members and, separately, associate member.) And this year, to celebrate the Lyme Art Colony's centenary, the gallery will be hung with the paintings of those great American artists who showed at the Library from 1902 through 1920. Because of them, Miss Florence's boarding house is now a Museum, its boarder-artist's paintings attract thousands, and a new gallery has (the Kriebel Gallery) has been built on those hallowed grounds to house the gift of an extraordinary collection of Lyme Art Colony pictures.

[N.B. to Mr. Kellaway: I am no good at footnotes -- you may want to order these differently.]

Footnotes

George Inness (born in New York, member of the National Academy, exhibited at Paris Salon) was, in his own time, compared to Corot and Rousseau.

Poore became a fixture, exhibiting through 1920., amusing the whole town with his antics, writing and illustrating a fond tongue-in-cheek piece ("With The Artists in Connecticut's Barbizon") for the New York Times in 1908.

Hassam founded The Ten in New York in 1897, devoted to Impressionism, which showed only the work of its members. It lasted twenty years.

Tonalism, as defined by Ranger, was "a harmonious modulation of color," meaning that by applying strokes of transparent color between layers of paint, a single color could be made to dominate. Tonalist pictures were inclined to be dark.

Impressionism relied on a mix of colors and small, quick brushstrokes. Inspired by Nature, Impressionist pictures were painted outdoors (in *plein air*) and nearly always filled with sun.

